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Council members look to save Old Blair Auditorium project

Once left for dead, vacant space would receive \$7.5 million

by Jason Tomassini | Staff Writer

Don't close the curtain on Old Blair Auditorium just yet.

Montgomery County Council members have recommended spending about \$7.5 million to renovate the long-dormant, deteriorating auditorium that connects Sligo Creek Elementary and Silver Spring International Middle schools into a performance space for Montgomery County Public Schools and the Silver Spring community.

In a joint work session between the council's Education and Health and Human Services committees Friday, four council members recommended amending Montgomery County Executive Isiah Leggett's proposed Capital Improvements Program for fiscal 2011 to 2016. Under Leggett's CIP, only \$600,000 is set aside for the auditorium, enough to match a state bond bill that expires at the end of fiscal 2012 and bring the total project funding up to \$1.2 million. But Leggett's recommendation didn't include funds for actual construction costs and would do little for the facility's progress, council members and MCPS officials said.

"You couldn't bring the building up to code for \$1.2 million," Joseph Lavorigna, acting director of the school system's Department of Facilities Management, said of Leggett's CIP, which included no funding for the auditorium in his original recommendation on Jan. 15.

Leggett's intent was to ensure the state bond bill would not expire, while also providing enough money to repair the building until construction funds became available beyond 2016, said county spokesman Patrick K. Lacefield.

"We have a finite amount of resources," Lacefield said in a phone interview Monday. "... The money we were proposing would be able to take care of concerns for the time being, and that would allow foundation for further funding later on."

The state bond bill was awarded in 2005 to Old Blair Auditorium Project Inc., a nonprofit residents group dedicated to renovating the facility, which has been closed since the 1999 relocation of Montgomery Blair High School. The bond is contingent on the county matching the \$600,000, and it was set to expire this year if not for an extension that has passed in the Maryland General Assembly, sponsored by Del. Heather R. Mizeur (D-Dist. 20) of Takoma Park and Del. Sheila Hixson (D-Dist. 20) of Silver Spring.

The renovation will be funded in the county's general CIP, but the facility will be operated by MCPS, which will also be responsible for maintenance costs. The auditorium would be renovated into a 750- to 800-seat, two-floor auditorium with four classrooms in the rear of the facility, a design determined through a \$25,000 feasibility study conducted last year.

Councilman George L. Leventhal and councilwomen Duchy Trachtenberg and Nancy Navarro supported the allocation of \$7.5 million for the auditorium, a motion brought forth by Councilwoman

Valerie Ervin and one that requires full council approval in next month's budget reconciliations.

"There is a huge lack of space for all kinds of needs, especially for needs of youth," said Ervin (D-Dist. 5) of Silver Spring.

Councilman Phil Andrews disagreed and rejected the motion, suggesting an athletic facility or meeting space would better serve the community. The Washington Revels performance group recently moved into a building on Dale Drive in Silver Spring, and Takoma Park is renovating its council chambers into a 154-seat auditorium.

While Leventhal supported the project because the facility is rapidly deteriorating, he agreed with Andrews and begrudged state officials for issuing the bond bill, claiming it forced the county's hand to build a facility it may not need.

The bond bill "cost the county \$8 million," said Leventhal (D-At large) of Takoma Park. "Thank you 'Senator So-and-so,' you gave \$600,000, so now we are committed to \$8 million for a project that's nice to do, but is not very high on the school system's priority list."

Under Ervin's proposal, \$600,000 will be allotted in fiscal 2012 to secure the matching state money and to fund the construction planning and design of the auditorium. The remainder of the project's funding will be allocated from fiscal 2014 to fiscal 2016.

"We know when the auditorium had 1,200 seats before it closed it was heavily used," said Stuart Moore, president of Old Blair Auditorium Inc., in response to Andrews contention that the renovated auditorium would be underused. "Our expectation is that in a reincarnated form, it would be well-used."